

Ruben Berrios-Martinez

Puerto Rico—Lithuania in Reverse?

The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee has favorably recommended a bill, S.712, to authorize a referendum on Puerto Rico's political status. The full Senate is expected to approve it shortly. Then it will be up to the House, which has already held extensive hearings on the matter, to act accordingly. It is urgent that Congress act soon. Puerto Rico's unresolved status constitutes a potentially explosive and disruptive nationality problem for the United States.

Puerto Rico, a U.S. possession as a consequence of the Spanish-American War of 1898, has been known since 1952 by the ambiguous if more respectable term "Commonwealth." Profound changes have taken place since, but the colonial relationship remains unaltered. More than one third of the Puerto Rican population has migrated to the United States. Puerto Rico's economy has become an appendage of the United States. Federal transfer payments have increased from negligible amounts to around \$6 billion annually, and more than 40 percent of the families receive federal nutritional assistance.

As federal power has expanded, the already limited local authority of Commonwealth has shrunk steadily, for U.S. laws and regulations apply to Puerto Rico, even though the island has no voting representation in Congress. Support for Commonwealth has declined substantially, and the United States is likely to soon be faced with an embarrassing statehood petition.

Is this a case of Lithuania in reverse? Over the years, economic integration, coupled with persecution of independentistas, overwhelming Americanization campaigns and massive federal subsidies have managed to divert Puerto Ricans from their natural path toward independence—a path once favored by a majority—and toward statehood.

So what is wrong with statehood, the traditional solution for dealing with territories peopled with settlers moving west, or with ethnic minorities coalescing around the American way of life?

Just this: Puerto Rico, a distinct Latin American nationality 60 percent of whose people do not speak English, presents a radically different situation. We Puerto Rican independentistas will never give up our inalienable right to struggle for independence, even under statehood. Minorities and majorities come and go; but nationalities remain. The United States is a unitary, not a multinational, country, and statehood was made for Americans, not for Puerto Ricans or other distinct nationalities.

Moreover, under statehood, Puerto Rico would lack fiscal, trade, and other powers to protect and develop its economy. We would be condemned to be a permanently underdeveloped region of the United States.

Puerto Rico's basic problem is dependence—not only juridical and political but also economic, cultural, social, and psychological.

"... statehood was made for Americans, not for Puerto Ricans or other distinct nationalities."

Although statehood might juridically appear as a solution to the colonial problem, in reality, for Puerto Rico it is just another form of subordination and dependence, colonialism in another guise. For statehood would only make economic, social, cultural and psychological dependence more acute, and its political power would serve primarily to press for increased federal subsidies.

A recent study by the Congressional Budget Office has calculated the *additional* cost to the American taxpayer of Puerto Rico as a state at \$25.6 billion in the first nine years. That is why the Puerto Rican statehooders' battle cry is "Statehood is for the poor"—a far cry from "Give me liberty or give me death!" Not to be outdone, Commonwealth leaders have petitioned the U.S. Senate for parity with the states in federal funding, but without Puerto Ricans' paying federal taxes.

The way out for the United States and Puerto Rico is to start moving away from dependence and statehood toward independence.

There is still time. After 92 years of colonialism, the basic constituent element of independence—primary loyalty to one's own national identity—is unanimously postulated by Puerto Ricans, including statehooders, as a nonnegotiable value. The president of the statehood party recently told a House subcommittee that he is, and feels, first Puerto Rican and then American. Independentistas, of course, are nothing but Puerto Rican.

The seed of independent nationhood is present. How can it be helped to blossom?

First, the United States must face the Puerto Rican status problem immediately. A plebiscite should be held in 1991 as proposed in S.712 (and in a recently introduced House bill). To postpone the plebiscite would be a shortsighted tactic based on the false premise that the statehood petition can be wished away. But such a course can only relinquish the initiative to statehooders, who, with time, will gain more strength. The tough decisions concerning statehood cannot be avoided.

But the U.S. Congress should spell out now the conditions it deems necessary to consider statehood, or it should eliminate the statehood alternative altogether. Congress should specify what Puerto Ricans can expect, whichever way they vote.

Congress should stipulate what it knows—that it will not seriously consider statehood until Puerto Rico at least reaches the per-capita level of the poorest state (Mississippi) and

is thus no longer considered an unacceptable drain on the U.S. Treasury. Congress should also articulate the unexpressed position of the immense majority of its members—that from the perspective of national loyalty, in order to be accepted as a state Puerto Rico must abide by the U.S. motto of "E Pluribus Unum," not by "E Pluribus Duum."

The United States should also discard colonial alternatives such as Commonwealth, "enhanced" or not. Commonwealth is the problem. It cannot therefore be the solution. Its continuation will only serve to multiply dependence and therefore continue to broaden support for statehood.

After 92 years of promoting colonialism, Congress has an obligation to exercise affirmative action as regards independence. This can be done directly through an independence option with fair and generous economic terms and indirectly by also offering an associated republic or sovereign free association option as defined by international law.

Only by relinquishing its sovereignty over the island—by fulfilling its duty to decolonize—will the United States solve its colonial problem in Puerto Rico. Only by assuming our full responsibility as a mature nationality can Puerto Ricans break the vicious circle of dependence and hopelessness.

The writer is president of the Puerto Rican Independence Party.